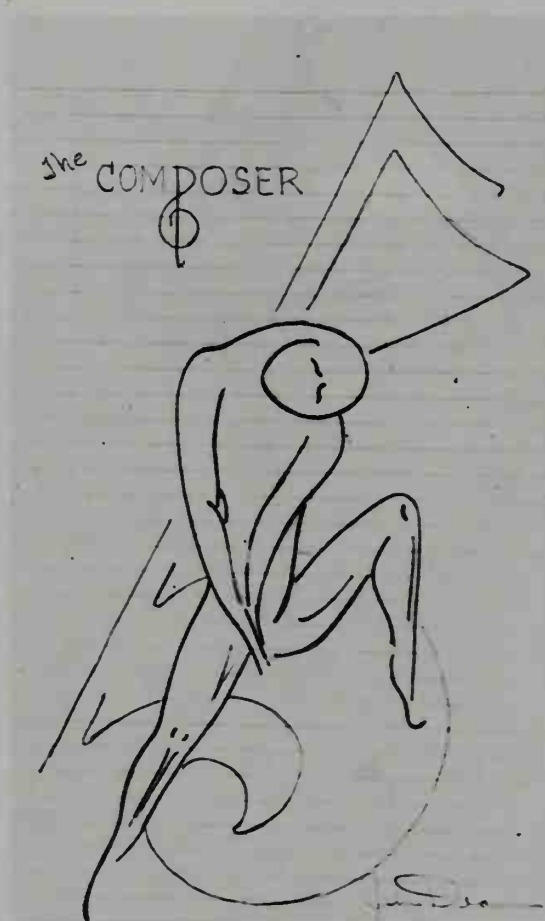


☆ THE TROUBLE WITH JIMMY ☆

During production of *Rebel Without a Cause*, James Dean was host to a thriving colony of crabs. He acquired the critters from a binge of sleeping around. Natalie Wood, Sal Mineo and Nick Adams had all observed their grungy co-star indulging in off-camera crotch-polishing; they thought he was imitating the scratch-'n-itch mannerisms of his slobbish hero, Marlon Brando. Director Nicholas Ray, amazed at his star's unconversance in such manners, dragged Dean off to a Burbank drugstore and treated him to a bottle of pungent crabocide.

Dean had taken to hanging out at the Club, an East Hollywood leather bar. The predatory night prowler, who dug anonymous sex, had recently discovered the magic world of S and M. He had gotten into beating, boots, belts, and bondage scenes. Regulars at the Club tagged him with a singular moniker: the Human Ashtray. When stoned, he would bare his chest and beg for his masters to stub out their butts on it. After his fatal car crash, the coroner made note of the "constellation of keratoid scars" on Jimmy's torso.

Dean had avoided service in Korea by leveling with his draft board—he informed the Fairmount Selective Service Unit that he was gay. When Hedda Hopper asked him how he had managed to stay out of the Army, he



replied: "I kissed the medic."

Shortly after arriving in Hollywood, Dean had adopted the route taken by many other broke, aspiring actors—he moved in with an older man. His host was TV director Rogers Brackett, who lived on posh Sunset Plaza Drive. The fan magazines spoke of their father-son



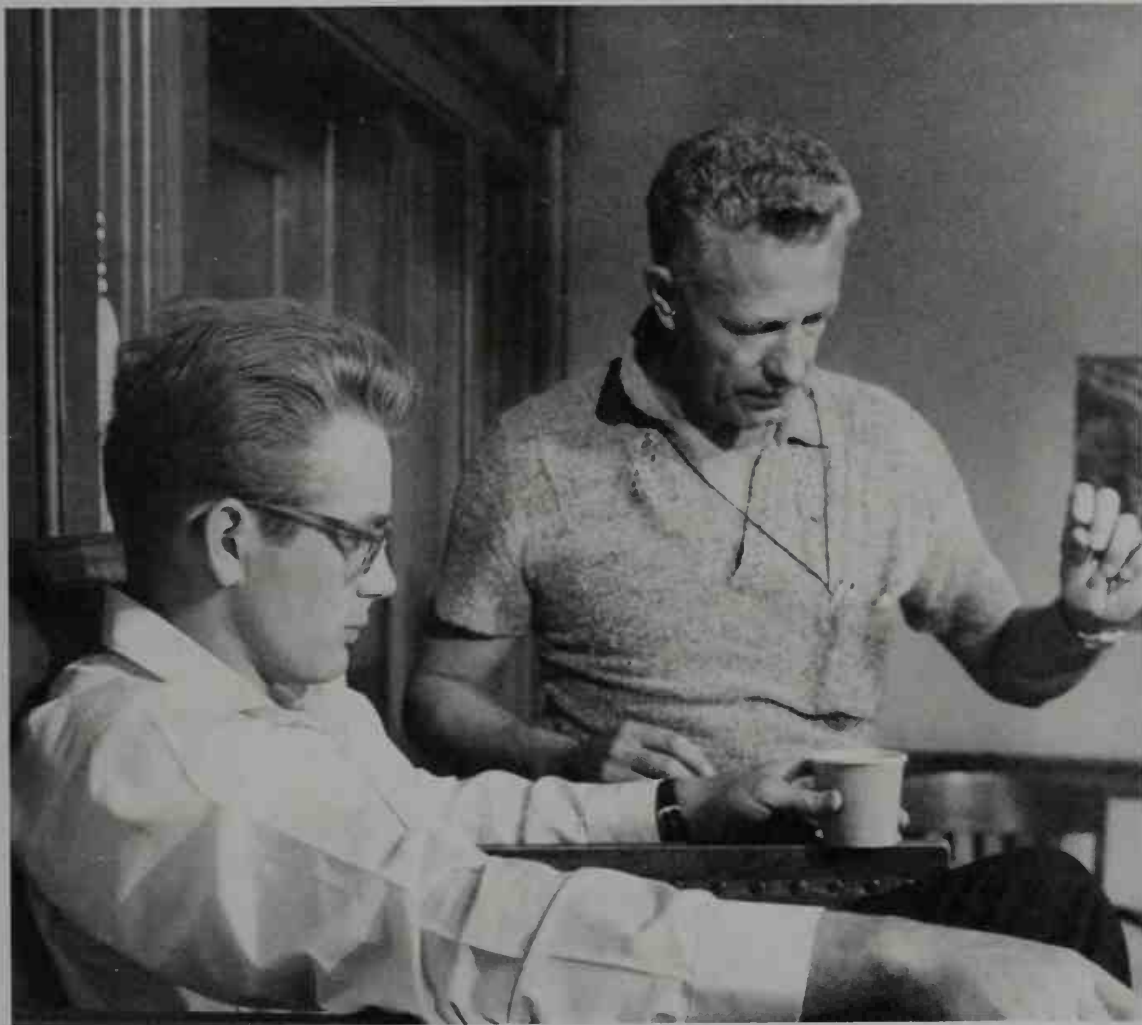
relationship. If so, it was touched by incest.

During the period just before his death, Dean should have been sitting on top of the world. *East of Eden* had been released and was a hit. Dean was twenty-four. *Rebel Without a Cause* and the ambitious *Giant* had been completed; neither was yet released, but it was evident from the preview of *Rebel* that the movie would be big. A great career lay ahead.

Or did it? Dean was withdrawn, compulsively promiscuous, but friendless, suspicious, moody, uncooperative, boorish and rude. He could, on occasion, be charming; on most occasions he was annoyingly nuts.

He betrayed a psychopathic personality, with fits of despondency that alternated with fits of wild jubilation. A classic manic-depressive. Mr. Nice Guy he wasn't—but his tormented screen persona hit a nerve with men, women, the young and the not-so-young.

Although his stage and screen experience was limited, he nonetheless felt himself competent to order camera and script changes. He blew his top when his suggestions were not taken. Directors humored him; behind his back they cursed him. His childish bids for attention were the talk of Hollywood. He turned up at dress affairs in sweatshirt and jeans; at a dinner party with Elia Kazan, Tony Perkins and Karl Malden,

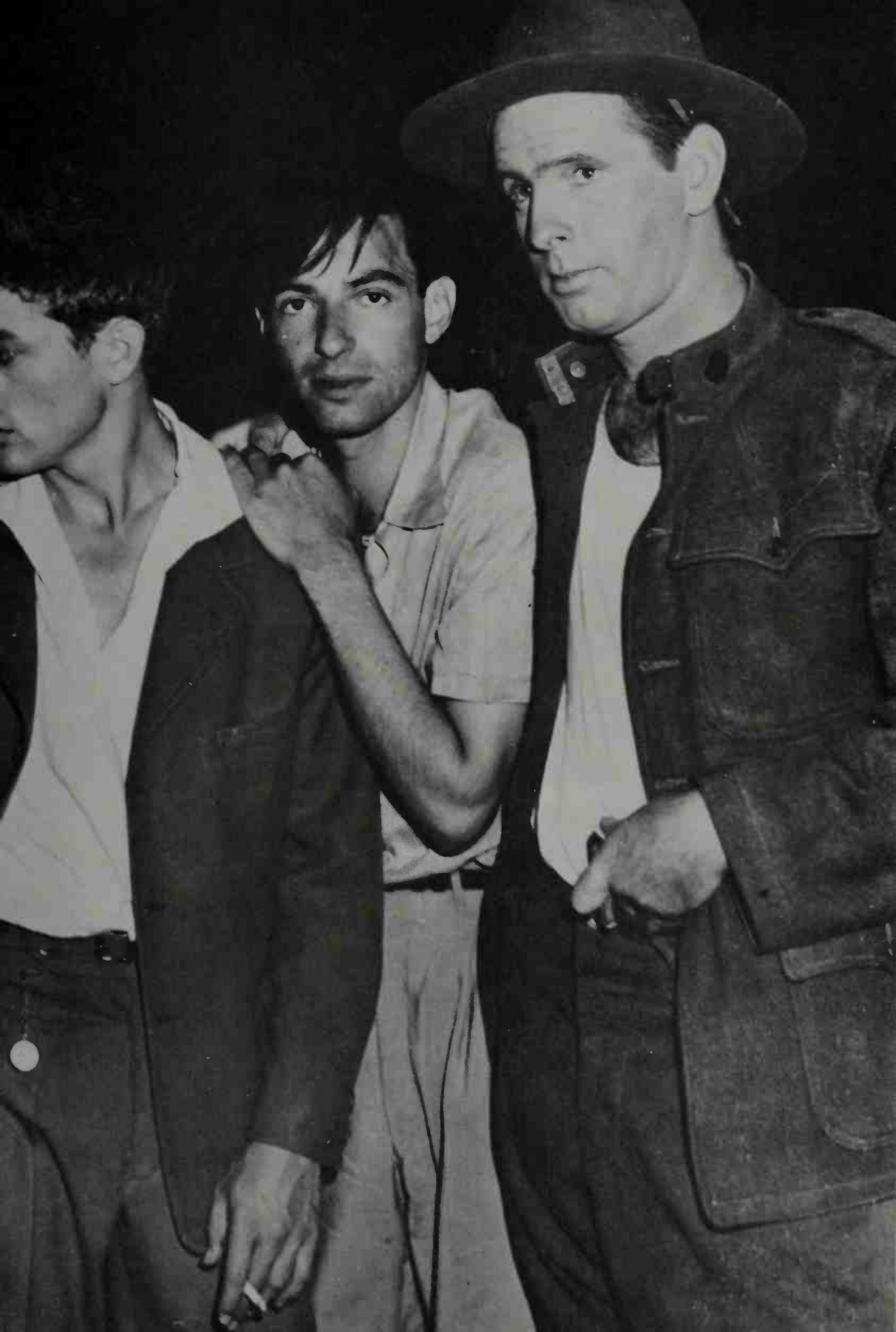


◀ J.D. with Natalie Wood in *Rebel Without a Cause*

▲ J.D. and Nick Ray: fatherly advice

Marlon Brando gives the phallic salute to Jimmy







Dean memorial head ▲

when the steaks arrived, Dean picked his up and threw it out the window. He spat at the portraits of Bogart, Cagney and Muni that adorned the walls of Warners' reception hall. At Chasen's his requests for service were accompanied by table-banging and silver-clanging.

He hid money in his mattress, slept on the floor at the homes of acquaintances, forgot rehearsals, and stayed out all night balling on the eve of studio calls. Toward the end, he was slow to learn his lines. He fluffed dialogue and fumed on the set. He was a confirmed pot-head. Writers who obtained interviews with him (few did) came away in

▲ Bedroom idyll in *East of Eden*





consternation. The actor had babbled irrelevancies or sat still and mute, staring at his visitors without batting an eye.

On the eve of his death, he had attended a gay party at Malibu, which had ended in a screaming match with an ex-lover, a man who accused him of dating women just for the sake of publicity. On September 30, 1955, he was doing a reckless 85 miles an hour in his silver Porsche on Highway 41 at Chalome, near Paso Robles. He was speeding, en route to a sports car race at Salinas, when he smashed into another vehicle. He was mangled, DOA at Paso Robles Hospital.

At first, public grief was modest.

Warners was grieved for financial reasons—*Rebel* and *Giant* had not been released and films starring recently deceased actors generally had bad track records. Then, without any studio hype, a legend grew. It was only several months after his death that the cult began to grow to vast proportions. The release of *Rebel* set off the greatest wave of posthumous worship in Hollywood history; it exceeded that for Valentino. Some fans committed suicide. Although Dean's career had been but a brief comet, many of his fans refused to accept his death. Thousands of letters poured in at the studio each day; most were from teenagers. Today, thirty years after his death, the fan mail



▲ Leave-taking in the Porsche: before and after ►





for Jimmy still keeps arriving.

Kids across the country identified with the troubled youngster, the man-boy anti-hero played by Dean in *Rebel*. Warners found that it had a hot cold property on its hands. As the cult spread, mementos of the actor—plastic models of his head, bits of his wrecked car, parts of his motorcycle—were auctioned at top prices.

It is quite likely that, even if he'd not been killed, Dean would not have made another movie after *Giant*. He was coming apart at the seams, on a self-destructive course, well before he was

totaled with his car.

His tombstone in Fairmount, Indiana, bears only his name and the stark dates: "1931–1955." A brief epitaph might have been: "Pretty much of a tramp." And yet, today, if Richard Gere, or Matt Dillon—or any of the other members of the boring regiment of James Dean clonettes spewed out by Francis Ford Coppola in *The Outsiders*—were to suffer Dean's fate, would cults arise, fans commit suicide, would mash notes arrive thirty years after their demise? Doubtful—Jimmy may have had crabs, but he also had durable charisma.



Dean: over and out ▲

